



## **Own Your Emotions: Labeling and Communicating Your Feelings**

Being a caregiver is difficult and at times can feel as though you are on an emotional roller coaster. It may feel as though things are out of control, and that there is no way for you to get back on track. While it may be difficult at times, you may also see yourself as being a natural caregiver, who has always focused on the needs of others rather than yourself. This focus on yourself can feel uncomfortable or selfish due to all the needs of others in your life. But let's be honest, your needs, wants and emotions are very important and deserve your time and attention too.

Think about the many emotions that you as a caregiver experience on a daily basis. How many emotions can you name? What would it be like to write them down as the day goes on? Do you give yourself the time and space to take notice of them, to name them, and then experience them? Likely not, with all that you are needing to manage each and every day. You may be thinking, I don't have time to focus on myself, my family needs me. Or perhaps that there just doesn't seem like there is enough time in the day to make space for yet another thing. The emotions that you are aware of may get pushed deep down inside because they are too painful and overwhelming to deal with.

Often when feeling difficult emotions, you may react to them in ways that can lead to making ineffective choices that result in negative outcomes for you. For example, you find yourself trying to balance tending to your family, being a full-time caregiver to a veteran, working to complete household tasks, and then your veteran voices concern that the bathroom isn't clean, the laundry isn't done, and dinner hasn't been cooked in two nights. Instead of engaging in a productive conversation about this, you may react out of frustration, get into a heated argument and then not speak for two days.

When you don't take a moment to take a deep breath, recognize and name the emotions you are experiencing, you may just react. Not recognizing your feelings and reacting to them can lead to dysfunctional behaviors and emotional shut down. Not recognizing and caring for these emotions can result in angry outbursts, depression, over eating or spending, and relationship conflicts. In the short term, these dysfunctional behaviors may feel like a way to resolve intolerably painful emotions, however, in the long term may cause more harm. Today, we are going to develop a better understanding of emotions including how to identify them, how to understand their function, how to learn to accept them, as well as communicate them so they don't result in destructive behaviors or negative outcomes for you.

You may be thinking, why do I have so much trouble controlling my emotions to begin with? There can be a multitude of factors that contribute to managing your feelings with the first being biological. Some people are just born to be more sensitive to emotional stimuli and detect emotions in their environment that others do not even



notice. You may find yourself having more intense emotions or feeling things more deeply than others. For some it may seem like your emotions come out of the blue and without warning, and because of this you may react without thinking. Being prone to being impulsive can also be biological, meaning that managing your emotions can be more difficult for you than it is for others. You may find it hard to restrain yourself from impulsive behaviors when you feel upset, making it hard to respond effectively or feel in control of yourself.

Your emotions and the intensity that you feel them can make it difficult to regulate or manage responsibly how you react or respond. When this happens, you are just reacting out of emotion rather than taking a moment to contemplate what would be the most effective response. It takes some attention to your feelings and some effort to change this pattern of reacting, but there is a payoff for you when you do put in the effort. The payoff comes when you can notice what you are feeling, use it as a guide and respond in ways that don't result in negative consequences for you and the relationships that matter to you.

It may be difficult to consider putting in the time or energy needed to make a change in how you regulate your emotions, as being a caregiver is already overwhelming. Making a commitment to change something about yourself may seem like just another task to fit into your overburdened schedule. This emotional overload can make it hard to attempt new skills. So even if you see you aren't managing your emotions well, it may be hard to imagine making a change in this area.

Some of you may find that you may not have the skills needed to make a change in how you regulate yourself emotionally. That's okay! How can you realistically make a change when you do not know how to go about it? We are going to provide some tools to help. In those moments of high emotional intensity, if you do not have a skill to utilize or a plan established for yourself, it would be difficult to just do something differently. We are all creatures of habit and tend to go with what we know, even if what we know is not the most effective choice.

Your social environment may also have a significant impact on your ability to regulate your emotions. You may have come from a family or social environment where your emotions were either intentionally or mistakenly invalidated. You may have heard things when you were a child such as, "Quit your crying," "Stop acting like a baby," or "I don't want to hear it, go to your room." You may also hear invalidating responses as an adult when becoming emotional such as "Normal people do not react this way or If you're going to be this emotional, why don't you go somewhere more private." This type of environment sends the message that your emotions are invalid, weird, wrong or bad.

This kind of family or social environment can make it difficult to learn how to regulate your emotions and actions. It can also potentially reinforce shutting down feelings and cause greater problems with being emotionally reactive or resorting to



negative coping behaviors. This kind of environment can result in you learning to become more out of control, to get people to respond in the way you want them to. For example, you may say or think, “My family doesn’t listen to me unless I scream or yell at them,” or “When I ignore my spouse for 4 days then they’ll realize what they did was wrong.” Another possible concern that may arise in these social environments is that others may order or command you to change your behaviors but may not support you on how to do this. This lack of support will make it hard to understand what to do to create a change.

Overall, we are all connected to one another and our environments. Biology and social environments influence you as a person. You reciprocate and influence feelings, thoughts and behaviors in your social environment, just as your social environment reciprocates and influences you. Sometimes just reflecting on this influence can help you develop a better understanding of how to contribute to a positive change in your ability to self-regulate.

So now that you know some of what may contribute to why emotions can be so hard to regulate, let’s look at getting a better understanding of emotions and how they operate. Because caregiving can be so overwhelming, you can get caught up in thinking that emotions are your enemy, but emotions serve a purpose. You need them! After all, emotions can be motivating! They can tell you when you need to make a change and help motivate you to take action. Can you think of a time when your love and commitment to your family helped you overcome an obstacle in your life? Can you think of a time when your emotions helped you make a change in your life that was helpful?

Emotions are an expression, that communicate important information to both yourself and to others. Think of your facial expressions and body language, which can be powerful forms of communication. Think about how you read not only the words others say, but additionally what their face and/ or body language is communicating. Sometimes the words and the facial/body language send two different messages. For example, maybe someone says they are not angry, but their voice is raised, their face is red, and their fists are clenched. Your body language can express your emotions even when you think you may be hiding it. Whether you intend to or not, your verbal and nonverbal communication of emotions has an influence on others.

Emotions communicate to you and to others. Emotional responses can give you valuable information about a situation. Think of your emotions acting like alarms or signals that something is happening. You may sometimes get that “gut feeling” which can be something of value. However, you do want to be cautious not to always treat your emotions as though they are facts. The stronger the emotion, the stronger your belief may be that the emotion is factual.



If you assume your emotional responses represent facts about the world, you may find that your perspective is inaccurate and that your reaction was based on your belief of what was going on in the situation rather than what was actually going on. For example, have you ever believed someone intended to hurt you and you felt hurt, maybe even reacted harshly towards them only to realize you had interpreted the situation wrongly? While your emotions give you valuable information about what matters to you, it doesn't mean that your emotional reactions can provide a 100% clear and truthful view of the facts or intent of another person. What they can do is tell you something about you.

Some of you may struggle with knowing how to name or identify the emotion you are feeling. Let's discuss five emotions caregivers commonly experience: sadness, anger, shame, guilt and happiness. Can you think of a time when you felt one of these emotions? Did you know what you were feeling? Did you know the name of the emotion? This process of identifying feelings may come naturally for some, but for others, can be more challenging!

Let's dig a little deeper into these emotions, starting with sadness. Sadness is an emotion that many caregivers of Veterans can relate to. Can you name some other descriptive words for sadness? A few that come to mind may be grief, disappointment, rejection, sorrow, suffering, and loneliness. What are some experiences in your life that could create the feeling of sadness? Some caregivers may relate to the experience of loss when life events don't go according to plan, discovering you are powerless to change your loved ones' condition, not getting something you feel you deserve, being in the company of someone else that is sad or in pain, when there is the death of a loved one or feeling isolated.

What happens to your body biologically when you become sad? Some may experience fatigue, pain, tearfulness, low motivation or dizziness. What about some common expressions or actions associated with sadness? Some of these expressions or actions could be avoidance, withdrawal from social contact, frowning, slumping in your posture, crying, acting helpless, inactivity, disconnecting from activities that once brought you joy and giving up and no longer trying to improve. Some of the aftereffects of sadness may include difficulty in remembering happy things, feeling irritable or grouchy, blaming or criticizing yourself, rumination or thinking over sad events from the past, insomnia, appetite changes and having an overall negative outlook. Are any of you caregivers experiencing sadness without realizing it?

Now let's look at guilt, often associated with remorse or regret. You may experience guilt if you find yourself doing or thinking something you believe to be wrong or something that violates your personal values causing damage or harm to another person or object or yourself. Have you ever thought, "I wish I had done that differently," "This is all my fault" or "I can't believe I behaved that way, what was I thinking?" These are all reflections of you feeling some guilt about how you behaved or that you feel you



are to blame for a situation. Physically you may notice when feeling guilty that you feel hot or red in the face, restless, nervous or as though you are suffocating. You may find yourself trying to make amends, apologizing, seeking forgiveness, or even making sacrifices to make up for the transgression.

Guilt, especially, is an emotion that caregivers often contend with because you are dealing not only with caring for yourself but caring for the needs of others. Sometimes those needs conflict. Sometimes the person you care for is also contributing to you feeling badly about not meeting their expectations of what they believe you should be doing. You can feel guilt both when you aren't meeting your own expectations and when not meeting another's expectations. This can be a critical point to consider because ultimately, you must decide what is right for you. When you do make decisions about what is right for you, then you no longer will feel guilt. You may feel sad or regret when you decide you can't meet someone else's expectations of you, but that is something different than feeling guilt. Guilt will pass once you take full responsibility for your decisions and actions.

What about anger? As a caregiver, do you find yourself becoming aggravated, annoyed, frustrated? You may even feel rage or bitterness. I'm sure many of you caregivers listening in can relate to that emotion. Why is that? Anger is a signal that your needs are not being met or that your boundaries are being crossed. I would venture to guess that many of you have had to put your needs aside and that you have had to tolerate many experiences where things didn't go as expected. Anger may arise when you observe your loved one in physical or emotional pain or when you were in physical or emotional pain yourself. Anger may also surface when you have had to put aside your own needs and desires to care for the needs of your loved one. Anger may surface when you are faced with the reality that your goals and future expectations are altered because of caregiving needs. Anger may occur when your boundaries are crossed, for example, when someone is coming into your home and not respecting your wishes or home.

When angry you may find yourself thinking how things should be different, how all of this is unfair, or thinking over and over about the event that set off your angry feelings. In these moments, you may find that your muscles tense, your teeth clench, you may want to yell, throw something or feel as though you may explode. You may get hot and find you can't stop your tears. Others may even laugh, grin or become sarcastic. Some may need to leave or withdraw from others. Anger can make it difficult to focus on anything or you may get tunnel vision, focusing only on what is causing you to be angry. You may start thinking about all the other situations that have caused you to feel angry as well, or you may just shut down completely.

Shame is another emotion that many caregivers can relate to. Shame may come up when rejected by people you care about, when you are criticized or when you are diminished, especially when you feel deserving of praise. Shame may arise when



comparing yourself or a situation to a standard that cannot be met, when you are laughed at, when another attacks your integrity or when your emotions and experiences are invalidated. Sometimes shame may occur when a boundary is crossed, and a private aspect of your life is exposed.

The beliefs you hold about yourself many times are due to how you were treated growing up and some experiences can result in you carrying around an undercurrent of shame. This undercurrent of shame may be evident in the belief that you are unlovable, that you're a bad person, that your behavior, thoughts and feelings are stupid, silly, or that you have let others down by not living up to their or your own expectations. You may recognize this feeling through physical responses as well, like a pain at the pit of your stomach, a sense of dread, hiding your face or body, and avoidance of other people. If unresolved these feelings of shame may lead to not feeling worthy of good treatment, not sticking up for yourself or not accomplishing all that you are capable of. Can any of you relate to any of these responses?

Happiness is the last emotion we will focus on, and it's one you may not recognize when you feel it given all the other complex emotions you can experience on a daily basis. Some other emotions associated with happiness are joy, pride, relief, amusement, hope, excitement, and optimism. These emotions may come to you when you receive positive recognition, achieving something you have worked hard for, receiving love and affection, being with or in contact of others you like, or when life situations turn out better than you thought they would. How do you know you are feeling happy or content? You may find yourself smiling, feeling more energetic and excitable, laughing, hugging, saying positive things to yourself and others, having open communication of your feelings, being talkative, and overall having a bright, glowing face. If you allow yourself to be present with your happiness you may also notice yourself being friendlier to others including strangers, engaging in helpful activities for others, having a higher tolerance for stress, or having a more positive outlook for the future.

Now that you have a better understanding of some of the common emotions' caregivers experience, you may be saying, "Now what"? Well let's look at how to place a name to the emotion you are experiencing. It's important to be able to name your emotions so that you then can identify the skill set to help you tolerate, accept and communicate it. We will be describing a great starting tool called the Model for Describing Emotions. As we will explain this tool it may be helpful to write down each step in the beginning, so you can really get the hang of it.

Let's use an example as we go through the Model for Describing Emotions. The first step is to review the prompting event that caused your emotion. We will use the example of a caregiver named John that is caring for his veteran wife who is diagnosed with TBI, PTSD and back injury from her time in service. John is trying to prepare a fourth of July vacation to accommodate his wife's needs as she tends to be



triggered by the large crowds and the loud noises of fireworks. John was extremely excited about the trip he planned and booked for them and decided to share these plans with his wife on her birthday. When he did, the veteran became terribly upset, tearful, and started shouting at him for not considering her wants and needs during that time. So, the prompting event in this example would be that John scheduled a surprise vacation for him and his wife during the week of July 4th as a surprise. It is important to describe the prompting event using only facts, rather than your interpretations.

Let's move onto step two, which is to observe and consider your interpretation or what you believed about this prompting event. For example, John's interpretations are, "I thought my wife would love the surprise, she always loved vacations in the past", "I don't understand her reaction to the surprise vacation, it's like I can't do anything right anymore" and "I don't know if my wife wants to be alone with me anymore".

Step three is to look at other aspects, situations or experiences that could be influencing your emotional response, also known as vulnerability factors. When looking at our example, John may have found out last week at his doctors' appointment that he is pre-diabetic and has high blood pressure. He is dealing with his 14-year-old daughter who is failing biology and at the same time has to replace four new tires on the family car and has to figure out how to get his wife to her three appointments at the VA next week. These examples of additional outside stressors not only contribute to John's current stress, they also may affect how he reacts or interprets his wife's reactions. Think about a time when your reaction to something was really influenced by other stresses going on at that same time. What are your current vulnerability factors? Have you seen your stresses influence how you react?

Going on to the next step is when you would focus on your own reactions. Take into consideration steps 1, 2, and 3, tell me what physical changes and expressions did you notice about yourself? Did you notice any change in your heart rate or body temperature? What about your body sensations? Do you recall your facial expression or body language? What words did you say out loud during this experience? What were your actions? For example, John experienced a lot of biological changes and expressions. Right away, his face became red and felt hot, and he started to perspire. He noticed himself scowling and began pacing the room back and forth as his wife was tearful and shouting. He felt like his heart was beating out of his chest and couldn't keep track of his thoughts as they were going so fast in his mind. He could feel the burning in his eyes and becoming tearful. He found himself saying how he doesn't feel appreciated, and that nothing he can do is right.

When hearing all of this, what emotion would you say John is experiencing? Step 5 is naming the emotion you are experiencing in the situation you chose to explore. In John's case, some would say the emotion he is experiencing is anger or frustration. Others may have said that he was sad. That's why emotions are complex, we can often experience more than one emotion in a single event.



In fact, Step 6 of the model asserts that identifying secondary emotions, if present, can be beneficial. So, in John's situation, he felt frustrated, sad, depleted, and overwhelmed. After the fact, John was able to take some time to calm down, consider what the triggering event was, think about how he was interpreting his wife's responses, notice how he reacted and identify what he felt. After this, the conversation that occurred between him and his wife the following day allowed them both to have a much clearer and less reactive conversation. John was able to name the emotions he was experiencing and communicate with his wife in a way that both were able to find understanding for one another.

What if you want to change the reaction that you have to an experience? What if you are like John, and want to learn to be less reactive and approach situations in a calmer way? What if you were able to think through experiences, not plow ahead with your assumptions and emotional reactions. Can you see how it might really help to get some perspective before you reacted?

Many caregivers, especially those who are burned out, may be quick to identify with the tendency to be reactive when emotions arise and wish they could be more purposeful in how they respond to events that cause feelings to surface. When your reactions are not effective for you, these techniques described in the steps we discussed can help.

Start by getting calm. This isn't always easy but if you can just slow down and take some breaths it will help. Take a break like John did to consider what is going on that you are reacting so strongly. Then begin to think and consider following the steps we talked about where you are taking into consideration all that is going into your reaction as well as questioning your point of view and checking the facts. Once you are calm and able to view the situation like a curious observer with an open mind, you will be in a much better position to be reasonable and clear about your actions.

Let's review what we have covered in the presentation so far. We have explored where our natural responses to emotions come from and how various factors influence your ability to regulate your emotions and your reactions. We have also learned about several common emotion's caregivers experience, their influence on caregivers physically and emotionally, and how they can impact the outcome of a situation. Additionally, we explored the Model for Describing Emotions and how this can help you identify what you are feeling when you are unsure. Lastly, we just covered the importance of checking to see if your emotional responses fit the facts of an experience. Before completing we are going to dive into the topic of communicating your emotions.

When you are communicating your experience, a great first step is to describe the current situation or as we described earlier the prompting event. It's best to stick to the facts and tell the person exactly the situation or behavior that you are reacting to. You want to be careful you are not assigning meaning or judgment to a situation as it





may not be true. Sticking to the facts will assist you in engaging in honest, open communication. Remember John from our earlier example? How would he communicate the facts of what the prompting event was that resulted in their conflict? If he was going to describe his experience in a direct, factual way he would say something like, "When I surprised you with the 4<sup>th</sup> of July trip and you began crying and shouting at me that I wasn't considering your wants and needs". That would be the first part of John's communication describing the facts.

Next, try expressing your feelings and opinions about the situation. So, for John that may sound something like, "I was surprised and sad when you responded this way." It's important to be mindful that the other person may not know how you feel. It's common to assume our loved ones will understand you emotionally, especially if you have shared a long-term relationship. However, that is untrue. Expressing your feelings and opinion is important so both of you can have a better understanding of one another.

Make sure you can name the emotion you are expressing. Often people make the mistake of saying what they think instead of saying how you feel. When you say what you think this can often result in you making assumptions about the other person and this can cause people to become defensive. Another common expression when someone asks how you are feeling is to respond either "good" or "bad." Instead try to label your emotions specifically. Name the feeling, for example "I am so sad" or "I feel so angry." This encourages you to understand your specific emotions and allows others to clearly understand how you feel.

It may also be helpful to take some time to reflect on where your emotions are coming from. What is the root cause of your emotion? Why are you feeling that way? If you know where your emotions are stemming from, it can be easier to understand it, and in turn communicate it to others. Using John's example, it may sound something like, "I was surprised and sad when you responded this way because I was hoping that you would see that I did it because I do care about what you need and was trying to make it something that you could really enjoy."

When feeling ready to express your feelings and opinions it can be more effective to use "I Messages." An "I Message" keeps the content focused on yourself rather than on others. For example, use phrases such as, "I feel," "I need," or to use "I want, or I don't want" rather than "You should," or "You shouldn't." When you use "I Messages" and keep the content focused on yourself, typically the other person will be much less likely to respond with defensiveness. That's because "I Messages are direct, honest and promote accountability because you are speaking only for yourself.

Another effective way to communicate your experiences is to assert yourself by asking for what you want or saying no clearly and directly. You want to be mindful that you are not assuming that others know what you want or need. It's okay to request a



want or need or to say no. This can be a challenging task for caregivers as the norm can be to focus on other's wants and needs rather than your own. However, being able to clearly state your own needs or clearly say no, will assist in keeping you well so that you can continue caregiving, without experiencing caregiver burnout.

Asking for what you want or need using the example of John may sound like, "When you began crying and shouting I felt shocked and disappointed because I was trying so hard to consider you and your needs and I wanted you to realize how much I care and how much I was trying to make you happy. I would feel so much better if you could consider what I was trying to do as something positive. Would you be willing to think about it from my point of view?"

If you do not communicate your needs to others, they won't know what you're asking of them. To be more effective communicators, it's important to speak your wants and needs in terms of requests rather than demands. When you speak about your wants and needs with the expectation that people should just know what you want without directly asking for it you are running the risk they won't know. Also asking for what you want and need, can be a vulnerable thing to admit to, so sometimes you may find yourself wanting to avoid being vulnerable by not asking.

It's also important to be mindful of your expectations of the other person when expressing yourself. Expressing your feelings does not mean the other person will respond in the way you would like them to or give you what you are asking for or need. So, if John's spouse can't understand where he is coming from or isn't able to give him the appreciation he is asking for, it can be disappointing, because he wanted and hoped the conversation would lead to that. Ultimately, it's important to remember that the other person has their own ability to decide whether they can give you what you want or need, and they have their own feelings that may not match your own.

Listening to other's wants and needs are just as important as being able to listen to your own. Remember you do not have to agree with another's feelings and wants, but rather aim to understand. Only when both sides have their needs expressed and understood can you begin to find common ground and be able to resolve conflicts and disagreements. If you believe that your feelings are always more important than someone else's, it's going to be very difficult to find solutions.

Of course, all these suggestions are much easier said than done, but it will be helpful to practice. Remember to have lots of patience with yourself and others as trying something new is difficult and takes time. An important message to remember is that your feelings are worthy and valid and worth expressing.

There has been a lot of information covered in this presentation. It's our hope that you were able to gain a better understanding of why you may experience emotions differently from others, how you react to emotion, how to understand and label emotions, and then how to communicate your emotions effectively with others. Again,



it's important to remember to be patient with yourself as you try out some of these strategies. If you would like to discuss this in depth, we invite you to contact the Caregiver Support Line as we are here and ready to support you in the important work of understanding and managing your emotions effectively.